

THOS AGNEW'S LTD

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Benedetto di Montagna (Vicenza
1481-1550)

Saint Anthony and the Centaur

Oil on panel

28 x 66 cm.



Provenance

Bought at Agnew's in the early 1970s as by Lorenzo Bastiani.

This beautiful and intriguing painting depicts one of the more unusual scenes from the life of St. Anthony, during his journey through the desert to find St Paul of Thebes, in which he encounters a demon in the form of a centaur.

Saint Anthony (ca. 251–356), also known as Anthony the Abbot, was a Christian saint from Egypt, celebrated as the first known ascetic to go into the wilderness (A.D. 270–271). He is generally considered to be the founder and father of organized Christian monasticism, although he himself preferred to live the life of a true hermit, apart from any community, in the deserts of Egypt. The biography of Saint Anthony's life by Athanasius of Alexandria helped to spread the concept of monasticism, particularly in Western Europe through Latin translations. Accounts of Saint Anthony enduring supernatural temptation in the desert provided a rich source of inspiration for Western art and literature, with the emphasis on these stories growing popular in the Middle Ages and remaining an exciting font of images for artists throughout art history, from Hieronymus Bosch to Salvador Dalí.

Saint Anthony is said to have faced a series of supernatural temptations during his pilgrimage to the desert. It is possible these events, like the paintings, are full of rich metaphor or in the case of the animals of the desert, perhaps a vision or dream. Some of the stories included in Saint Anthony's biography are perpetuated now mostly in paintings, where they give an opportunity for artists to depict their more lurid or bizarre interpretations.

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The present subject, known as The Satyr and the Centaur, is described in the Catholic Encyclopedia as follows:

“Saint Anthony was on a journey in the desert to find Saint Paul of Thebes, who according to his dream was a better Hermit than he (*Vitae Patrum* Book 1a- Collected from Jerome. Chapter VI). Saint Anthony had been under the impression that he was the first person to ever dwell in the desert; however, due to the dream, Saint Anthony was called into the desert to find his "better" Saint Paul. On his way there, he ran into two demons in the forms of a centaur and a satyr. Many works of art depict Saint Anthony meeting with the centaur and the satyr. Western theology considers these demons to have been temptations. At any rate, he was stopped by these demons and he asked them, "Who are you?" To that the satyr replied, "I am a corpse, one of those whom the heathen call satyrs, and by whom they are snared into idolatry." The satyr then tried to terrify the saint while the centaur acknowledged the overthrow of the gods. In the end, the centaur tried to show Saint Anthony the way to his destination while the satyr ended up asking for Saint Anthony's blessing”

Here Saint Anthony is shown with his traditional attributes; a T-shaped crutch, a pig, peering from behind the foliage in the background, and a bell, used to drive away evil spirits and attract alms. In the background of the painting we see a small pair of figures embracing, a continuous narrative depicting the later meeting of St. Anthony and St. Paul. Our painting is of particular interest due to the highly unusual depiction of the centaur, who is typically depicted as naked man beast, being dressed in the clothing of a monk.

We are grateful to Mauro Lucco for pointing out that our painting is one of the now lost "*partimenti*" of the altarpiece by Benedetto, formerly in the church of San Biagio in Vicenza, signed and dated 1535 (see Fig.1). These panels are described in Boschini's "*Gioielli pittoreschi...della città di Vicenza*" as: "*varij partimenti in numero di otto con varie tentazioni del demonio al S. Antonio (abate)*"¹

Benedetto di Montagna is primarily known as an engraver, and painted works by him are rare. In this painting, particularly in the exquisite detail of the foliage, we can see his interest in engravings and most notably the influence of Dürer, whose work he copied from engravings.

¹ 1677, p. 92

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Professor Lucco, who is preparing a monograph on Bartolomeo Montagna, believes that the figures in our panel are consistent with those in other pictures by Benedetto, such as the altarpiece in the Museo della Scienza e della tecnica, Milan, which is signed and dated 1528, and the others in the province of Vicenza. Another panel, also depicting St. Anthony and the Centaur was (formerly?) in the Lanckaronski collection, Vienna (fig.2). It too was previously given to Bartolomeo.



Fig. 1

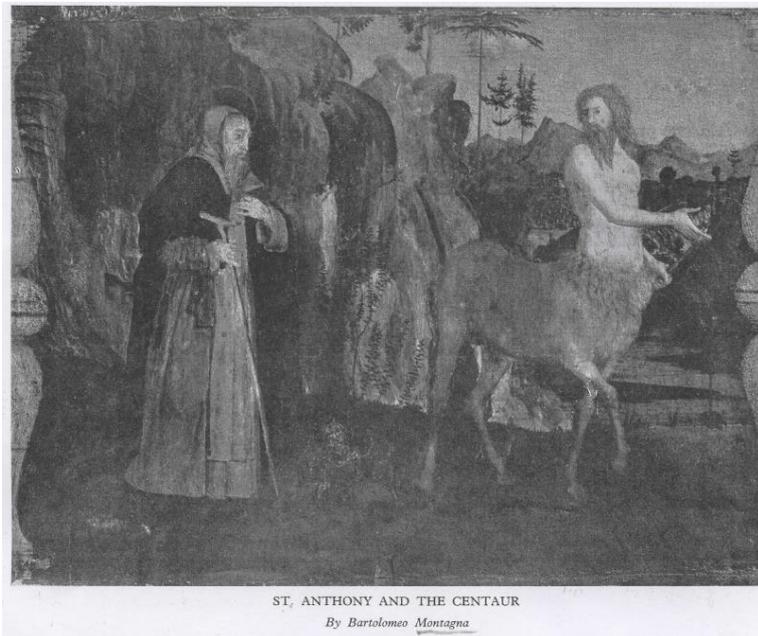


Fig. 2